



James Bailey

all my love
are my life
James

The Flaming Drop

"If anyone thinks the silk is not safe," T4 James C. Bailey would say, "send them around to see me. If a man can make a safe parachute drop through the burning floor of a C-47 airplane, he can sure do it anytime, anywhere." The year was 1945 and Bailey was offering this analogy from his current post behind the reception desk of the newly formed 82nd Airborne Division Museum in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He had spent the past few months enthusiastically working on the creation of the new museum...building displays and sorting through memorabilia of the 82nd's illustrious history...a post far safer than one he held only a year before.

Bailey's analogy was referring to an event that occurred on September 17th, 1944...an important date in the history of WWII and a date he would vividly remember the rest of his life. On that day he had been a Corporal in the 82nd Airborne Division/504th Parachute Battalion. He was among eighteen other paratroopers packed aboard a C-47 flying low over the English Channel nearing the defensively flooded lands of Holland. They were not alone in the sky. They were but a tiny element in the giant allied airborne invasion group spearheading operation Market Garden.

Market Garden was a WWII Allied effort into Nazi-occupied Holland to capture some strategic territory between Belgium and Arnhem, a distance of about 100 miles. By reclaiming vital land, the Allies hoped to isolate the enemy in the western part of the country from those in Germany, and also to create a base of operation to eventually strike into the Nazi homeland.

Hundreds of C-47's filled the bright daytime skies in a steady stream flying at a fixed altitude and speed. From only 600 feet above ground one could easily discern male from female on the ground. It began as a great day for a bike ride in the countryside. Some people waved...others scurried for cover as the blanket of planes crossed overhead.

It took nearly 35 minutes for this gigantic fleet of planes to pass any given point on the ground...35 long minutes for the Nazi flak batteries to zero-in on the fleet with their powerful 88mm flak guns...a task they expertly accomplished. The advance allied bombing runs had only slightly diminished the Nazi anti-aircraft power.

As they crossed the coastline, from his seat near the middle of the plane Bailey caught glimpses of a sky increasingly spotted with the ominous bright flashes and resulting deadly black puffs of exploding flak shells. He felt an all too

familiar tightness in his stomach...the same feeling he had in Sicily and Anzio. He recalled the first time he had ever said a prayer in real fear...July 9th, 1943. On that night he had been riding in another C-47 while it flew low over the Mediterranean Sea towards Sicily, and his first combat mission.

A loud boom jarred Bailey back to reality as he watched the Lieutenant seated next to the exit door grimace and drop to his knees on the floor. Shrapnel had slashed his leg. Instantly more huge explosions peppered flak through the skin of the plane. Paratroopers cursed the stings from fiery shrapnel. Bailey tensed his body, expecting to be stung himself but his attention quickly turned to another major threat.

"Fire!" someone yelled. Smoke poured into the cabin. The plane shook violently. The pilot immediately turned on the green jump-light, signaling the paratroopers to exit the plane.

"Hook up," the Lieutenant had the presence of mind to order as he rolled about the floor. Two troopers were pushing an equipment bundle out the open door.

Everyone struggled to stand against the pitching of the plane and the weight of their equipment...a struggle they must win or risk certain death...a struggle to hook up their all-important static lines to the overhead static rail...lines that hopefully would pull open their parachutes when they jumped from the plane. There was no panic. In mere seconds everyone was hooked up and awaiting the order to exit.

"Go, go, go" was the simple order yelled. Troopers reacted to their training and expertly shuffled towards the door in the rear and their turn to escape. Suddenly an explosion released an orange burst of flame up from the rear of the plane, blocking their escape. Bailey watched as several men in line between him and the rear suddenly dropped from sight through a hole in the shredded belly of the plane. Intense flames immediately claimed the area where the men had been standing. He heard their shouts diminish as they plummeted towards the ground, and heard the 'snap' of static lines as they reached full extension. He hoped the static lines had done their job and opened those chutes. The heat was intense...the air was too acrid to breathe...he squinted through the smoke but could see little...the plane was shuddering and convulsing...time was running out.

"Is there a hole where those guys were just standing?" Bailey's mind rapidly quizzed. "Is it big enough for me to jump through? Will I get hung up and burn to death or get slashed on the sharp metal skin of the plane? And even if I make it through, will my chute make it? Will it melt in the heat?"

Then, as if taking his destiny into his own hands, he decides, " I am not going to die without a try."

Bailey shouted and motioned to Private Ford standing close behind him. "I'm jumping through that hole, Ford! "

He closed his eyes, tucked his chin into his chest, and leaped into the cauldron. He cringed as the flames singed his eyebrows and the hair on his hands. His M-1 rifle briefly snagged on something...he released his grip on it. He was only concerned with his immediate survival, not the protection that his rifle may provide on the ground...if he arrived alive. An instant later he felt a rush of cold air as he cleared the inferno through the God-provided hole. Then in quick succession he felt the familiar jerk of his static line deploying his chute and the welcomed jolt that every paratrooper recognizes as his opening chute.

He immediately looked up with dreaded anticipation to see if his chute was damaged or entangled. It was not. He spotted someone he assumed to be Private Ford floating down above him. It seemed at least one other man had followed him through the hole. He hoped the others were as lucky. He watched the doomed plane veer off and dive towards destruction. Seconds later and far away, it dove into the ground.

Now he assessed his situation. He felt like he had fallen into a bed of hot coals. His shirtsleeves were nearly burned away and still smoldering. His trouser legs had big holes in them and the exposed skin was blistered and raw. He tried to brush the remaining hot ashes from his arms but his hands were so badly burned he couldn't tolerate the pain of the effort. The front of his parachute harness had been so heated by the flames that its nylon straps had melted, scorching his skin along their path from his groin to his shoulders. He considered what the consequences could have been if they had burned through. He had been lucky...or had he?

The bright sky revealed a vast expanse of calm water below. As a defensive measure the Nazis had flooded the area and the only dry land in sight was a raised roadbed about ½ mile away. The tops of most of the roadside telephone poles were barely visible above the waterline. Unable to use his wounded hands, he painfully swung his body to and fro, trying to guide his flight path towards the raised road. His efforts were futile. Any other paratrooper would probably have been counting his blessings now, but James Charles Bailey had yet another problem...he couldn't swim...and not just because of his burns...he had never learned to swim. He stopped his struggle and settled in for the quick ride to his destiny.

As he dropped towards what he was sure would be his watery grave, he recalled the day he had joined the Army. Since childhood J.C. Bailey, the only name he had ever been called by as a child, had wanted to become a soldier and escape the poverty and gypsy life his family endured on red clay farms from Georgia to Alabama. He remembered his frustrated Army recruiting sergeant saying, "J.C. Bailey, huh? What does the J.C. stand for?"

"It don't stand for nothing, sergeant," Bailey replied.

"It's gotta stand for something if you wanna be in this man's army, son", the sergeant threatened.

Bailey paused briefly and then responded, "It stands for James Charles, sergeant."

And, he remembered how the sergeant accepted those names, and how good it made the former J.C. Bailey and the new James Charles Bailey feel to be in the US Army.

In the brief seconds remaining before he would slash into the water below, his memory flashed him back to the Fort Benning, Georgia hospital bed where he had laid during a bout with the mumps and watched paratroopers train through the hospital window. Watching those paratroopers train, and the fact that they made fifty dollars more salary a month than a regular Joe, had convinced him that he wanted to be a part of that elite volunteer group. He remembered the day he had volunteered...how, in his determination to become a paratrooper, he had veered from his own standards and lied about his ability to swim, a skill required of all paratroops. And how he had skillfully used his six-foot height to manipulate his way successfully through the paratrooper swimming test along that riverbank at Fort Benning, not so long ago.

As the yards to a watery touchdown became feet, and the feet became inches, his fear of drowning far exceeded the pain of his burns. He stretched his body height to it's fullest, in hopes his toes would touch a bottom he prayed was there. His toes pierced the water and instantly struck the bottom. His legs folded under him and he collapsed like a rag doll. The water was only thigh deep. Fate, once again, had shone it's light on Corporal James Charles Bailey.

After his struggle to stand up in the shallow water, he quickly looked around. He had hoped to enlist Private Ford to help free him from his chute harness but he didn't see Ford or anyone else nearby. He could see two other people in the water quite far away...too far to recognize. He assumed they were troopers, too

but he discarded any thoughts of yelling for help...Nazi patrols could be anywhere. Luckily, he saw no one who looked like the enemy. He grimaced in pain as he gingerly gripped his knife and cut away the parachute harness. Then he began a painful trudge through the cold water towards the road, reluctantly leaving all his equipment behind.

Only a few yards into the journey he stepped into a ditch and plummeted into water over his head. The unexpected rush of the cold water in his face strangled him and he thrashed about to get back to the surface, only inches above him. He used the strength of his legs to repeatedly bounce up from the bottom of the ditch and slowly gained a toehold on the opposite side.

"If I had landed in that ditch first," he would recall later, "I probably would have just give up and drowned."

He meticulously probed to find a shallow water path to the road, keeping as low as possible in the water to prevent his discovery. He soon pinpointed three areas as potential enemy locations. Luckily they were all on his right, so he made his way left. Very soon the drone of the C47s faded away and the nearby anti-aircraft fire ceased. In the distance, like a huge approaching thunderstorm, the Nazi 88's continued their assault on the fleet. All was quiet except his sloshing in the water and an occasional distant indiscernible yell. His teeth chattered...from the cold or from the shock of his burns, he did not know. His probe to the road took nearly two hours. There, he silently prayed his thanks for the dry ground beneath his feet as he took cover in a patch of bushes.

Soon two other American troopers, Reardon and Woodstock, and two resistance people, a man and a woman, came by and joined him. At the suggestion of the man, they all ran down the raised roadbed to a tiny nearby village and took refuge in a small vacant two-story house.

As the ranking American soldier, Bailey stationed Woodstock at an upstairs window and Reardon at a downstairs window. Woodstock was armed with an M1 rifle but Reardon only had a pistol...he too had lost his rifle in the jump. Neither of the resistance people was armed. Bailey wished he had a weapon himself. He wondered if he might have been able to hold onto his rifle for just a brief second longer when he had jumped from the plane, but realized that he wouldn't be able to open his burned hands to fire it anyway. His eyes were nearly closed by his blistered swelling face. There they anxiously waited, hoping to be discovered by other friendlies. It wasn't in the cards.

In less than an hour Woodstock spotted a group of seven Nazis conducting a house-to-house search. Anxiety ran high but the fugitives waited silently for the

Nazis to approach. When they walked directly by the downstairs window, Reardon fired his pistol point blank at one of them. The windowpane must have deflected the bullet because it missed. The Nazis darted for cover and began firing and lobbing grenades at the house. After four explosions rocked the house, Bailey realized they were heavily outgunned, so he called upon his common sense and ordered Reardon to wave a flag of surrender.

James Charles Bailey was a prisoner of war. He never received medical treatment for his burns. For weeks he tried to sleep with his arms raised to stop the pulsating pain of those burns. Other POW's fed him his ration of bread because he couldn't feed himself.

In late fall 1944, after nearly seven months in captivity, he and thousands of other POW's were force marched in the snow to Bad Orb, Germany... over 400 miles in 36 days. They were given only two slices of bread a day. He lost 40 pounds off his already slim frame. Along the way he watched Nazi guards assassinate two British soldiers for trying to build a fire to keep from freezing. He sometimes slept in the snow...but he was never sick. During his captivity he never took his boots off to sleep for fear they would be stolen by his starving fellow comrades to trade for bread. The exhaustive months of airborne training had hardened him for this ordeal...and kept him alive.

Two weeks after his arrival in Bad Orb, General George Patton's advance liberated him. He would recount later that good fortune was not just with him again but it had never left. He returned to the states, was discharged, took a ninety-day furlough, returned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina and promptly enlisted for three more years.

"Going through the bottom was all right in an emergency," he would later joke, "but me, I'd rather hit the silk through the door...it's cooler!"

EPILOGUE

James Charles Bailey married Virginia Jones in October 1945. They chose her hometown of Wilson, North Carolina for their home. They parented a son, Johnnie, in 1947 and James completed his military obligation at Fort Bragg, North Carolina in 1948. Choosing what many considered an unlikely career for someone who had nearly died from fire, James Bailey joined the Wilson, North Carolina Fire Department in 1949 and fought fire for the residents of that community until his retirement 30 years later. He loved every minute of it.

Some of his most prized lifelong possessions were his medals...his airborne wings, his All American patch, Airborne patch, campaign ribbons, the Bronze Star, POW Medal and Purple Heart.

James Charles Bailey lost a battle with lung cancer in 1991 and died at the age of 73.

ABOUT THE STORY

James Bailey's son, Johnnie, wrote the Flaming Drop in August 1996. It was compiled from notes made by an anonymous interviewer and from James' own account of the event in his autobiography.

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